

Memories from the Disaster in 2004 of the Ship *Vicuña*

Priscila Onório Figueira

Summary

On 15 November 2004, the ship *Vicuña* exploded in the Dom Pedro II Port, located in the city of Paranaguá, in Brazil. The disaster caused a spill of 285 tons of fuel oil that contaminated mangroves and sandbanks, culminating in a fishing ban. The Amparo community, located in front of the Port, was one of the places most affected by the leakage contamination. This study aims to highlight the stories of fishermen of the Amparo community, as well as to shed light on how they remember the disaster.

On 15 November 2004, two explosions occurred in the Chilean ship *Vicuña* during a methanol unloading operation at the pier for dangerous goods at the Dom Pedro II Port, located in the city of Paranaguá, Brazil. After the explosion, the ship's tanks ruptured, resulting in the leakage of bunker oil, diesel oil, and lubricating oil, for a total of approximately 285 tons. The leakage disaster caused the contamination of the coast ecosystems such as mangroves, sandbanks, and beaches. After this event, both fishing and the capture of shellfish and crustaceans were banned for approximately 60 days. A total of 36 fishing communities from the Paranaguá estuarine complex were affected by the fishing ban.



The coast of Amparo, 2014.

Photograph by Priscila Onório Figueira, 25 January 2014.



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The *Vicuña* ship accident was not an isolated event: together with similar incidents at the Port of Paranaguá, it was a part of a larger environmental disaster taking place over time. In 2001, there was a rupture of a Petrobras pipeline, which is a publicly traded company that drains oil derivatives and provides bunker oil to ships in the Port of Paranaguá. The rupture caused the leakage of four thousand liters of diesel oil, contaminating mangroves and swamps, also leading to a ban in fishing. Disasters involving pollution of oceans, rivers, and estuaries by the spill of oil derivatives are routine. In 2000, there was a leakage in a Petrobras pipeline in Rio de Janeiro, which spilled around 1.3 thousand tons of oil in the Guanabara Bay. This disaster is similar to *Vicuña's*, since thousands of fishermen were harmed and are still claiming compensation today. In Latin America, ruptures in the Trans-Ecuadorian Pipeline System (SOTE) in the Ecuadorian Amazon region have been contaminating the Coca and Napo rivers for several years. Riverside and indigenous populations that depend on fishing are the most affected, living in a constant state of food emergencies.



A fisherman on the coast of Amparo, 2011.

Photograph by Priscila Onório Figueira, 26 March 2011.



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During the *Vicuña* disaster, palliative measures were created to assist affected fishermen. The companies Cattalini and P&I Club, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the shipowner subsidized basic food baskets. Cattalini paid half a minimum wage in a single installment for those workers registered at the Fishermen's Colony. The Ministry of Labor paid for emergency unemployment insurance. The company KCL-*Serviços Industriais* claimed to have hired people from local communities to carry out cleaning services in the affected areas. In May 2005, the *Laudo técnico do acidente do navio Vicuña* [Technical report on the *Vicuña* ship accident] was published, bringing detailed information about the event, the main environmental impacts, and notices of infraction to the responsible companies. The technical report was written by two environmental agencies: IBAMA, which is a federal agency under the Ministry of Environment, and IAP, which is an agency linked to the Government of the State of Paraná.

The Amparo community was the place most affected by the oil contamination, being located in the city of Paranaguá and included in the Environmental Preservation Area of Guaraqueçaba. The location can only be accessed by sea. In 2014, approximately one hundred families lived in Amparo and the vast majority of them depend on artisanal fishing in order to not only obtain their income through the commercialization of fish, but

also to complement their daily diet.

Interactive map showing the locations of the Dom Pedro II port and the Amparo community.

Through oral history interviews conducted between 2011 and 2014, the memories of fishermen who experienced the disaster were brought to light, enabling the discussion of issues not considered in the technical report. Fishermen did not remember the exact date or time at which the disaster occurred; the memories that first crossed their minds referred to the noise of explosions, and the image of fire, smoke, and oil that contaminated the beach of Amparo. They pointed out that black oil from the spill can still be found on beaches and mangroves. They also claimed that, after the disaster, there was a decrease in the number of some species of fish and crustaceans, such as shrimp, hake, and leatherjacket fish. Regarding the fishing ban period, the interviews demonstrated other issues. Retired fishermen remembered that they did not have the right to receive basic food baskets, emergency wages, and unemployment insurance, experiencing economic and food deprivation. They had to use their savings and ask for support from their family and neighbors in order to pay their bills and eat. Some of the interviewed fishermen worked on cleaning the beach and collecting oil and were not entitled to emergency unemployment insurance. This demonstrates that, due to economic deprivation and the delay in the payment of unemployment insurance, many fishermen accepted temporary employment.



The landing stage that gives access to Amparo community, 2010.

Photograph by Priscila Onório Figueira, 30 April 2010.

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Photograph taken from another perspective showing the port of Paranaguá in the background, 2011.

Photograph by Priscila Onório Figueira, 26 March 2011.

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The technical report on the *Vicuña* ship accident points out that long-term monitoring would be important in order to understand the dimension of the environmental impacts. However, there was no environmental monitoring after its publication. On the other hand, memories of fishermen emphasize the long-term impacts on the environment. Regarding the fined companies, unanswered questions still remain, for example, the case of the

company Cattalini, which was fined fifty million Brazilian reais, equivalent to approximately ten million US dollars at the current value. The company avoided the fine by constructing a marine aquarium, worth five million Brazilian reais, a work that demonstrates the silence regarding the impacts of the environmental disaster, impacts that have not been redeemed. Disregarded, fishermen were “compensated” with measures that excluded them. Far beyond what has been described in this article, the sea means life for fishermen and, since the disaster caused changes in the sea, it also caused changes in their lives.

Further readings:

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- Figueira, Priscila. “Memórias do desastre ambiental do navio *Vicuña* (2004).” *Faces da História* 6, no. 1 (2019): 120–40.
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- Pollak, Michael. “Memória, Esquecimento e Silêncio.” *Estudos Históricos* 2, no. 3 (1989): 3–15.
- Pontes, Nádia. “Vazamento de petróleo coloca em risco indígenas no Equador.” *Deutsche Welle*, 4 May 2020.

Related links:

- *Vicunã – o acidente*, TVCI (video)
<https://youtu.be/isGWpY2IGbY>

How to cite:

Onório Figueira, Priscila. “Memories from the Disaster in 2004 of the Ship *Vicuña*.” Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (Spring 2021), no. 7. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. doi:10.5282/rcc/9228



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ISSN 2199-3408

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Priscila Onório Figueira has an undergraduate degree in history from the University of the State of Paraná (2011) and a graduate master's degree in history from the Federal University of Paraná (2014). Her thesis focused on the *Vicuña* ship disaster. In her doctorate, she aims to research the transformation and the environmental devastation caused by the construction of the Dom Pedro II Port, on the shores of the Bay of Paranaguá during the years from 1830 to 1930.

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